rations of the indian wars

By Martin S. Peterson

If it were to be said that the following article should convince the reader that rations for fighting men in our day are vastly better than the rations of yesterday, the reader might justifiably suppose that he could venture the same conclusion without reading the article. A better lesson to be learned from this brief review of past rations and past experiments in rations is: amid much callous disregard for the importance of food to health and morale there runs throughout our military history a continuous thread of interest in achieving for rations greater variety, better preservation, ready usefulness on the trail and in the field, and, discernibly, a greater interest in the palatability factor of foods.

Compared to modern rations the food provided the Indian fighters on the Western Frontier during most of the nineteenth century was monotonous, unpalatable, and clumsy to use. In addition, it was doubtless rough on the digestive tract. Had it not been for their vigorous life in the open and the superb physical condition of most of the soldiers—the weak ones either died, deserted, or were invalided home—it is probable that echoes of violent dissatisfaction would still be heard, rumbling through the mountain canyons and over the high plains where the wardens of the frontier kept their vigil.

A prodigious number of calories must have been burned up in the training of recruits. The rigorous drill was chiefly of the skirmish type, since squad movements on the order of "squads right! squads left! squads right front into line!" came in only after the middle of the century.

Drill for the cavalry was keyed to bugle calls. The usual pattern was to post horsemen at intervals of thirty yards, blow the starting call, and set the whole company galloping out over the rough prairie terrain until a second call sent the horsemen wheeling to the right or, as the case might be, to the left. Further calls in the sequence put the cavalry through rallies to the left or right; into dead halt, dismount and fire; into remount, about face, and return to the starting post.

Drill on foot followed much the same routine although the basic pattern in this case was a forward rush of fifty yards; falling to prone position; firing at a distant target; rising and rushing forward another fifty yards to repeat the exercise. Reloading with rapidity and economy of motion was an integral part of this drill in the early years of frontier military life. The repeating rifle, which put an end to the chore of reloading after each shot, came into use shortly before the Civil War. After a few weeks of this type of physical conditioning, most of the

recruits—a hardy, rough lot to begin with—could probably have eaten buffalo on the hoof, starting with the horns, three times a day.

From the Revolutionary War up to the time of World War I rations for the Services were prescribed by Congress. Up to the Civil War the components were rigidly fixed and the issue never varied: a pound-and-a-half of flour, or about a pound of hardtack; a little over a pound of corned beef, or a little less than a pound of bacon or salt pork or salt fish; a few ounces of butter or lard; a half-pint of brandy, rum, or whiskey. This daily ration was supplemented periodically with dried peas or beans, vinegar, salt, and after 1832, with coffee and sugar. When coffee and sugar came into the ration, the rum and whiskey went out—with what loss of morale or with what effect on nutrition, the records do not say. There was, of course, the sutler's store where the article was always for sale.

Corn-meal was an alternate for the flour in many areas, and tea was provided along with the coffee at some time after 1835. *General Regulations of the United States Army* for these years and *Inspection Report,* Volume II (and following), yield other facts of interest. The "one hot meal per day" idea is evident in the thinking on rations even in that era. Bread, it was suggested, should be heated slightly (but never eaten hot from the oven) and soup should always be served hot and if possible be cooked for five hours before being served. Eating hot bread was regarded in the 19th century as a cardinal offense against health.

It would take no extensive knowledge of nutrition to recognize that this diet, unrelieved, could result in scurvy. And so it did—scurvy was distinctly present among frontier soldiers during the winter months. A standing remedy was to go out and bring in some fresh meat, usually an antelope or a buffalo, and have the patients eat some of the fresh-butchered meat, preferably raw. Raw potato was also used as a medicant against scurvy.

food by forage

It was expected, of course, that frontier soldiers would forage for themselves from the countryside. In a wilderness almost untouched in its game resources, this was a natural recourse when monotony of diet became unbearable. The wild life began to stir forth from their winter quarters as the grass turned green again, and the game paths and pastures were beset with sudden death. Frontier soldiers were expert marksmen. After the Civil War the use of dogs in hunting became a part of garrison life. Perhaps one of the greatest enthusiasts for this sport was General G. A. Custer who led the hunt in person, galloping down the valleys and over the upland hills with all the dash and verve he was capable of—which was considerable. The Dakota country was then full of deer. "We had a saddle of venison hanging on the wood-house almost constantly during the winter," writes Elizabeth Custer, the general's devoted wife. "The officers' and even the soldiers' tables had this rarity to vary the monotony of the inevitable beef."

About the only time hunting was not permitted was during an expedition against the Indians, at which time the danger of firing shots that might be heard by the omnipresent Indian scouting parties was considered too great to risk. Even in these circumstances, however, the men succeeded in obtaining wild game. According to them it was done by means of their sabers. In actuality they shot down the game and then

ran a saber through the animal to give a vague semblance of truth to the explanation that the animal had been speared on the run. This patent fraud was not frowned upon particularly by their commanders. Fresh meat was fresh meat. It was an open and standing joke in one regiment, engaging in a punitive expedition against the redskins, that several members of their outfit could kill game with a saber when the game was as much as forty yards away.

other foraging resources

Since forts on the frontier were almost invariably placed on a neck of land where two streams joined—thus providing natural moats on two sides of the fortified area—it was a simple matter to add fish to the daily menu. In a few cases it is a matter of record that the Quartermaster supplied small boats for the explicit purpose of fishing. The men themselves furnished the tackle. Rods were obtained from the trees or bushes along the stream. In the Missouri and in the Platte catfish were available, and in mountain streams throughout the Rockies an equally delectable fish, trout, were plentiful.

Under the head of foraging for food should also come, perhaps, meals taken in the lodges of friendly Indians. This was a natural and rather frequent occurrence. A fair number of soldiers took wives from among the Indians encamped close to the forts, and were therefore both hosts and guests at the feasts in the Indian villages.

The menu and the cuisine, not to mention the table manners of the Indians, left something to be desired. After a buffalo hunt, for instance, the Indians butchered the slain animals on the spot, pausing in their gory operations to cut out the more esoteric parts of the animal and devour them on the spot, raw. They were particularly fond of heart and liver, and Parkman, a primary source for pictures of plains life in the mid-1840's, describes with more gusto than repugnance the horrible, blood-smeared appearance of the savages as they finished their labors and their impromptu feasting. It seems evident that Parkman was not unconscious of the effect his livid accounts would have on elite circles in Cambridge.

Eating buffalo in the raw, of course, was a custom of the field. In the Indian villages, the meat of choice was boiled dog.

Trappers, soldiers, and others long inured to the plains quickly lost any prejudices they once might have had against being served a portion of man's faithful friend. When fate landed them in the lodges, they fell to at the dog feasts like good Indians. Francis Parkman partook of dog meat on several occasions and described each in detail—as, for example, the following:

> I had observed some time before a litter of well-grown black puppies, comfortably nestled among some buffalo robes at one side; but this newcomer speedily disturbed their enjoyment; for seizing one of them by the hind paw, she dragged him out, and carrying him to the entrance of the lodge, hammered him on the head until she killed him. Conscious to what this preparation portended, I looked through a hole in the back of the lodge to see the next steps of the process. The squaw, holding the puppy by the legs, was swinging him to and fro through the blaze of the fire, until the hair was singed off. This done, she unsheathered her knife and cut him into small pieces, which she dropped into a kettle to boil. In a few moments a large wooden dish was set before us, filled with this delicate preparation. A dog-feast is the greatest compliment a Dahcotah can offer to his guest; and knowing that to refuse eating would be an affront, we attacked the little dog and devoured him before the eyes of his unconscious parent. Smoke in the meantime was preparing his great pipe. It was lighted when we had finished our repast, and we passed it from one another till the bowl was empty. This done, we

took our leave without further ceremony, knocked at the gate of the fort, and after making ourselves known, were admitted.

It seems probable that Parkman then went straight to bed.

That Parkman had no love for the dogs that infested the Indian lodges is evident in another incident—one concerning an unusually obnoxious dog which threatened his dignity one day by snarling and snapping at him as he walked among the lodges. Since the beady eyes of the Indians were on him, to see how he would demean himself under this torrent of yapping, Parkman was particularly annoyed. He writes:

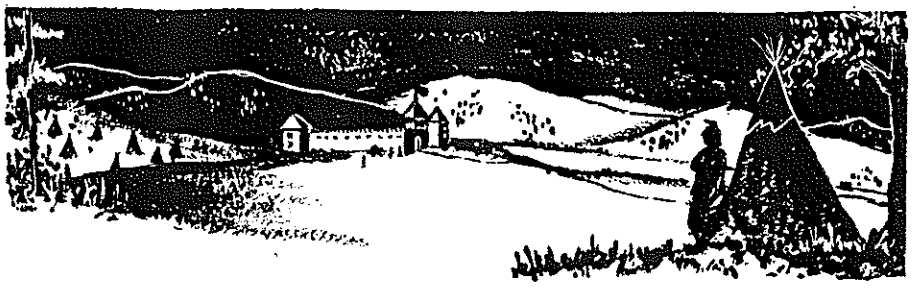
I called him but he only growled the more. I looked at him well. He was fat and slick; just such a dog as I wanted. "My friend," thought I, "you shall pay for this! I will have you eaten this very morning."

I intended that day to give the Indians a feast by way of conveying a favorable impression of my character and dignity; and a white dog is the dish which the customs of the Dahcotah prescribe for all occasions of formality and importance. I consulted Reynal; he soon discovered that an old woman in the next lodge was the owner of the white dog. I took a gaudy cotton handkerchief, and, laying it on the ground, arranged some vermillion beads and other trinkets upon it. Then the old squaw was summoned. I pointed to the dog and to the handkerchief. She gave a scream of delight, snatched up the prize, and vanished with it into her lodge. For a few more trifles I engaged the services of two other squaws, each of whom took the dog by one of his paws and led him away. Having killed him they threw him into a fire to singe; then chopped him up and put him into two large kettles to boil. Meantime I told Raymond to fry in buffalo fat what little flour we had left, and also to make a kettle of tea as an additional luxury.

The guests now seated themselves on the ground in a circle and, when the feast was ready, two of the Indians dispensed each guest a portion of dog from ladles cleverly made of the horn of Rocky mountain sheep. When finished with the entree, the guests were served tea—extended a bit by the addition of soot scraped from the meat pot. Parkman, it seemed, lacked a little of having enough tea to go round, and an obliging companion hit upon this handy adulterant.

Enough has doubtless been said to indicate that food foraged from the bleak plains area, that obtained from the nomadic Indians in particular, was not always elegant. It will not, perhaps, change the picture to add that after the supply of domesticated dogs ran out, some of the Indian tribes turned to prairie dogs which, though much smaller, were available in unlimited quantity. They still find a place on the menu of tribes in remote areas.

Looking back upon frontier fare from the vantage ground of present day refinements, it seems crude to say the least. It is possible, however, that its nutritional value, based on the theory that the mineral and vitamin content of wild game and pristine vegetation exceeded that of the domesticated plants and animals



storehouse of Nature herself — was doubtless good food or bad food depending on the way it was maintained and the way it was prepared for eating. Records show few compliments paid to the cooks and bakers of the frontier garrisons. Some of the cooks on the frontier were of German birth, however, and had knowledge of German cookery. There is some indication that they brought considerable improvement into garrison food handling and preparation. A few arts were learned from the trappers—for example, barbecuing buffalo hump-ribs by digging a hole, placing the meat—incased in the inevitable buffalo sack—in the hole, adding buffalo fat or salt pork, filling the hole with earth, building a fire over the filled-in hole, and keeping the fire going for twenty-four hours. The results were universally acclaimed as superfine. This method of cookery was supposed to have been borrowed from the Comanche, but not much evidence is available to support the claim. The Indians, in common with most primitives, did not possess a very keen gustatory sense and never got much further in the art of meat cookery than roasting their dinner on a spit or boiling it in an earthenware kettle. A good deal of it they ate raw.

Perhaps the best meals served on the frontier were those in the messrooms of the forts on holidays. For this occasion the private soldier would take two dollars from his slender monthly salary of eight dollars and throw it into the pot for the purchase of dainties—candy, ginger, and such other sweetmeats as the sutler's store could provide. These, topping off the venison, prairie chicken, or other seasonal game, provided the accent for a repast much above the level of the daily fare. It is likely on these occasions that the cooks and bakers sharpened their culinary style with ample potions of that amber liquid, ale. At all events, the nineteenth century symbol for exquisite cookery, "Delmonico's," was complimentarily and sincerely uttered by the soldiers during these festive occasions. In the '70's at that lonely post neighboring the Black Hills, Fort Laramie, the chinaware would have been Delft on this occasion and the cutlery silver. As the century advanced other outposts took on more tone, too, and the food everywhere became more varied and the dining service less austere.

It is likely that a curve showing the diminishing interest of the soldiers in forcing the redskins to bite the dust and one showing the gradual increase of variety in the diet of the watchmen of our Western Frontier would eventually converge. For it is possible that with the disappearance of dried buffalo meat, boiled dog, and hardtack—men on the frontier were a little less men.

Martin S. Peterson

DOCUMENTATION

The wealth of information on military life in the Old West makes the task of documentation more difficult from the standpoint of selection than from that of collection. Facts on food for the frontier military were principally obtained from *General Regulations of the U. S. Army*, Old Records Department, War Department; from Everett Dick's *Vanguards of the Frontier;* from Elizabeth Custer's *Boots and Saddles;* from G. C. Quiett's excellent studies *Pay Dirt* and *They Built the West;* and from various general books on the frontier West. "Biographies" of the old forts—*Old Fort Laramie*, for example—were also examined. Parkman's adventures are, of course, quoted from Francis Parkman's *The Oregon Trail*, originally published in 1849, and the reference to Hugh Glass is from Stanley Vestal's *Jim Bridger, Mountain Man.* From Colonel Rohland A. Isker (Ret.), who reviewed the article, came further information as well as verification of the facts presented. Conversations with old soldiers, held at various times during his years as a Cavalry officer in the Black Hills and elsewhere on the high plains, yielded much lore on frontier subsistence.

food research and development

OPERATIONAL RATIONS — PROBLEMS IN THE ATTAINMENT OF NUTRITIONAL RELIABILITY

The rations and food packets designed to maintain the fighting efficiency of our Armed Forces in the novel tactical situations of Twentieth Century global warfare are described. Essential military requirements are defined and illustrate the severe limitations imposed on development of rations of nutritional reliability. This article frankly explores the challenging problems involved in (1) determining nutrient stability, (2) establishing special nutrient requirements under combat stresses, and (3) ration evaluation. How unavoidable nutrient losses are counteracted to provide required amounts at time of consumption is exemplified by the vitamin fortification program.

Burning deserts, oceans, mountains, jungles, and freezing polar regions can no longer be regarded as barriers to military movements. To invent or to adapt equipment and machinery necessary to conduct military operations in any area of the world has come to be an absolute requirement for our own and other Armed Forces. But the efficiency of our Armed Forces is in the final analysis dependent not upon machines but upon the ability of individual men to withstand extremes of climate and terrain. Fed poorly their fighting efficiency drops. The major objective of rations development is therefore to provide the soldier with suitable food in order to help maintain his fighting efficiency under all circumstances.

Tactical situations, climate, terrain, and feeding methods and equipment create a large number of feeding problems which are met by a number of different rations, supplementary packs and food packets.

operational rations

Whenever the tactical situation permits, troops are subsisted mainly on *Field Ration A,* a garrison type of ration designed for large group feeding. Issued in bulk, it is prepared by Army cooks and bakers with ample kitchen facilities. *Field Ration A* contains a large proportion of perishable items such as fresh or frozen meats, fruits, vegetables, and dairy products, and hence refrigeration must be available. Food purchases are based on master menus submitted by the Food Service Division, QMC. Market conditions sometimes necessitate local modifications of these.

Operational Ration B, similar to the *Field Ration A* except that nonperishable food has been substituted for perishable foods, is used mainly